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Shades of Light and Darkness

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The seemingly abrupt fading of the luminosity of sunlit evenings at summer's end gives rise to the phrase *Oíche fhómhair ag tuitim* ('autumn nightfall'). This is sometimes coupled with the formulation *Urchar bodaigh i bpoll móna* – as in *urchar bodaigh i bpoll móna nó oíche fhómhair ag tuitim. Urchar bodaigh i bpoll móna* (literally 'a churl's cast in a bog hole') is defined by Ó Dónaill as a 'random shot'.[1] Thus, this whole combination may be rendered in English, 'A churl's cast in a bog hole or autumn nightfall'.

I have argued elsewhere that a shot of this sort was not merely random but rather calculated and surreptitious in character; and I have also noted that the word spawns various levels of application, many of which are sexual in nature.[2] The disparate parts of this coalition – whether arising from a sneak attack (a 'random shot') or simply the circumstance of having been caught unawares by a rapid onset of changing light ('autumn nightfall') – find a common denominator in the element of surprise.

Towards the end of the year, in the aftermath of Christmas and New Year celebrations, we find another old saying – *Gearrógaí dubha dubha na Nollag* ('The short, extremely dark days of Christmas-tide')[3] – that stands comparison with the graceful phrasing of *oíche fhómhair ag tuitim* in the manner of its taking stock of time's passing. In this instance, rather than registering surprise, the frustration occasioned by the stubborn persistence of winter gloom takes centre stage.

This conversation piece is remarkable for its ubiquity – in the form *Gearrógaí dubha na Nollag* in many parts of Ireland – and for its rarity in the form *Gearrógaí dubha dubha na Nollag* in which the adjective *dubh* ('black') is repeated.[4] In fact, this form is known to me only from Erris in the north-western corner of County Mayo, where I have frequently heard mention of it at that time of year.

Typically, this saying would be bandied about during the end days of December and early days of New Year, its *terminus post quem* occasionally being regarded as 6 January when it would be finally ousted by another popular saying: *Fad choiscéim coiligh (ar an charn aoiligh) ar an lá* – 'The length of a cock's stride (on the dunghill) [added] to the day'. The variable nature of the timing of the delivery of this saying – ranging from St Stephen's Day (27 December) to the Feast of the Epiphany (6 January) – is reflected in the examples cited by T. S. Ó Máille in his collection of Connacht proverbs, including *Fad coiscéim coiligh ó Lá Nodlag Beag* ('the length of a cock's stride from Epiphany'), *Coiscéim coiligh d'fhad ar an lá* ('a cock's stride of length [added] to the day'), and *Lá Nodlag Beag/Lá Fhéile Stiofáin, beidh coiscéim coiligh ar an gcarn aoiligh d'fhad ar an lá* ([from]

[1] Niall Ó Dónaill, ed., *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977), s.v. *bodach*.
[2] Séamas Ó Catháin, '*Urchar Bodaigh i bPoll Móna* ("A Random Shot") and Other Irish Sayings', *Irish University Review* 54/1 (2024): 72–79. https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2024.0648.
[3] 'The short dark days about Christmas', Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin & Cork: Irish Texts Society, 1927), s.v. *gearróg*.
[4] Repetition of a similar character can be seen in the phrases *ar chor ar bith bith* (only known to me from Erris) and in *aon chor in aon chor* (commonly used in Munster Irish), both in the meaning 'at all at all', for which usage in Hiberno-English see Terence Patrick Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English*, 3rd edn. (Dublin: Gill, 2020), 11, where *ar chor ar bith* is suggested as the origin of the expression 'at all at all' and the technique of doubling for emphasis is characterized as 'expressing assertion'.

Epiphany/St Stephen's Day, there will be the length of a cock's stride on the dungheap [added] to the day').[5] The saying is sometimes abbreviated in everyday speech to "*Fad choiscéim coiligh…*", featuring thus as an opening gambit in casual conversations occurring at that time of year.[6]

Somehow, for a short period immediately previous to whichever date was viewed as applicable locally, the tenebrity and durability of winter darkness was perceived as being more intense than at any point since the passing of the winter solstice, when the sun is farthest removed from these latitudes and appears to pause before commencing its return journey. But, year in year out, the balance shifts and wins through though at the outset only by a barely discernible margin.

The latter saying – *Fad choiscéim coiligh (ar an charn aoiligh) ar an lá* – conjures up the colourful image of a strutting cockerel perched atop a farmyard dunghill, slowly elevating one leg, then briefly balancing on one foot before gradually lowering it and placing it a minuscule remove in advance of where it had previously stood. *Fad choiscéim coiligh* ('The length of a cock's stride') was deemed to be the extent of the minute gradation by which the process of increasing levels of daylight could be measured i.e. the tiniest of margins.

The sense of impatience with the forces of nature vented in *Gearrógaí dubha (dubha) na Nollag* ('The short, extremely dark days of Christmas-tide') – augmented by the duplication of the adjective *dubh* – is every bit as striking as the sentiment expressed in *oíche fhómhair ag tuitim* ('autumn nightfall'): observation of a year exasperatingly tardy in turning in the first instance, and the sudden, subtly shifting quality of light in the other. These changes are aptly marked in popular parlance – the former with a sense of exasperation and a degree of prolepsis, the latter with a hint of regret and vague foreboding, both sizing up time's passing and chronicling its progress in adages as eloquent as the architecture of a megalithic monument mutely tracking the sun's rays.

Lodged in the interstice between major calendar festivals such as Christmas and St Bridget's Day (1 February, the commencement of the Irish spring) on the one hand, and Lúnasa Day (the beginning of harvest celebrated on a Sunday at the end of July or beginning of August) and Samhain (1 November) on the other, artless sayings such as *Gearrógaí dubha (dubha) na Nollag* and *Fad choiscéim coiligh (ar an charn aoiligh) ar an lá* loiter in the wings of everyday discourse, pending the arrival of the apposite opportunity for their deployment.

For all their unpretentiousness, they form a delightful and integral part of the rich panoply of festival custom and commemoration in Ireland, where they represent neither banal patter nor idiosyncratic invention but rather a time-honoured, if modest, component in the enduring community inheritance of Gaelic-language culture.

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[5] Tomás S. Ó Máille, *Sean-Fhocla Chonnacht* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1948), vol.1, No. 2253, p. 346. Dinneen (*op.cit*., p. 230) gives "*coiscéim choiligh*" as meaning " a cock's step, a very short interval" and adds "*lá coille coiscéim choiligh*","a cock's step is the increase of the day's length on New Year's Day"; see Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla*, 230, s.v. *coiscéim.*

[6] Archer Taylor traces the origin of this saying to St Lucy's Day (originally 23 December) at the winter solstice: 'On the festival of St Lucy/The day grows by the leap of a flea. "The leap of a flea" refers to the lengthening shadow on the sun dial'. He adds that the '… association of St Lucy and the winter solstice may possibly have some connection with the well-established association of Lucy with "lux" ("light")'. See Archer Taylor, *The Proverb and Index for the Proverb* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1962), 117; or (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962), 119.

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